POLAR BEAR RANGE STATES' MEETING

National Conservation Training Center, Shepherdstown, West Virginia, U.S.A.
26-28 June 2007

Summary record of the third plenary session of the meeting

Morning of 27 June 2007

Chairman: Kenneth Stansell
Rapporteurs: Mary Cogliano
Tim Van Norman

Announcements and Administrative Details

It was agreed that comments on the summary reports of previous Plenary Sessions should be submitted in writing to the Chairman for incorporation into the summary record. It was also agreed that the summary record would include each range country's PowerPoint presentation with associated notes rather than the submitted country reports.

Import/Export Processes

The United States noted that polar bears are listed in Appendix II of CITES. Any export would require legal acquisition and non-detriment findings prior to the export. Although CITES does not require import permits, stricter domestic measures may. The United States has a stricter domestic measure, the MMPA, that puts greater restrictions on activities involving polar bears.

Under the MMPA, permits are required for scientific research, public display, and other activities that must enhance the survival of the species, as well as for the import of sport hunted trophies from Canada. The MMPA does have provisions for cultural exchange and for the movement of specimens obtained prior to the enactment of the MMPA. Alaskan native handicrafts can be exported for personal, non-commercial uses. Handicrafts from other countries, however, cannot be imported.

In the last 10 years, 860 permits have been issued under the MMPA for the import of sport-hunted trophies from Canada. Included in the MMPA is a provision that requires hunters importing trophies to contribute USD1000 to a conservation fund used to support conservation initiatives for the shared US-Russia polar bear populations.

Finally, the United States expressed interest in how other range countries make the required CITES findings, particularly the non-detriment finding, for the export of polar bears.

Greenland acknowledged that only three years ago a new Executive Order implemented CITES. The Executive Order is administered by The Ministry of Health and Environment, that is not represented at the meeting. It has established a process for making non-detriment findings and initiated development of significant trade reviews. The polar bear is currently subjected to non-detriment finding evaluation. Greenland inquired about how other range countries deal with non-detriment findings and what institutions are involved, as well as other practical implementation issues.

The Chairman stated that range countries should consider providing the requested information bilaterally to Greenland.

Canada recognized that CITES is working well, and noted that in Canada CITES is implemented by the Wild Animal and Plant Protection and Regulation of International and Interprovincial Trade Act (WAPPRIITA). CITES Management and Scientific Authorities are at both the Federal and Provincial/Territorial levels. Canada stated that it believes international trade in polar bears does not threaten the species' survival. Canada also reiterated its opposition to any change to the 1994 amendments to the MMPA.

Norway stated that imports and exports are not a significant issue for them and agreed with the US intervention. Norway noted that most of their CITES polar bear trade consists of the import of skins from Canada and the import and export of scientific samples.

Russia emphasized it is an important issue, particularly if native take were to increase. Russia raised some concerns regarding research samples of polar bears and brown bears from zoos and the difficulties in distinguishing between them. While some illegal polar bear harvest has been identified, there is no evidence of illegal export of polar bear, its parts or derivatives from Russia. Russia noted that it is in compliance with CITES and has established appropriate Scientific and Management Authorities.

Greenland noted that in its new Executive Order, the import and export of polar bear gall bladders is not allowed. Greenland acknowledged the challenges it is facing in implementing CITES, particularly the limitations of available financial resources. The Ministry of Fisheries, Hunting and Agriculture, who is responsible for polar bear management, did express a strong interest in being more active in CITES, and has begun participating in CITES Animals Committee meetings. Greenland also noted that if trophy hunting were to be allowed in the future, additional monitoring would be required.

The Chairman, summarizing the discussion, noted that all range countries indicated adequate statutory authority for implementation of CITES, and that CITES is an important aspect of polar bear management. Current processes are working well through bilateral dialogue, and range countries should share implementation best practices. The Chairman also acknowledged significant progress by Greenland in the implementation of CITES.

The United States asked that the delegations commit to communicate with each other on any progress or changes. Such information exchange would be beneficial.

Canada asked that a statement that international trade in polar bears is not threatening their survival be included in the summary.

Norway agreed that at this time, international trade is not threatening the survival of polar bears.

Although at this time having no trade in polar bears, Russia agreed with the statement.

The United States concurred.

The Chairman noted for the record that the range countries agree with Canada's statement.

Sport Harvest

Canada began the discussion noting that it is the only range country that allows sport hunting of polar bears. Canada described its co-management system, administered under land claims of native peoples, for establishing quotas. In Nunavut, the system is a process involving community consultations, the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board, Territorial governments, Hunter Trapper Associations, Wildlife Boards, and the ministerial authorities. Once a quota is established, communities decide how to use that quota. A portion of the quota can be used for sport hunted trophies, since all hunts are considered part of the subsistence-hunting quota. Polar bears can only be either harvested by aboriginal hunters belonging to one of the two land claims, or sanctioned by them. As with other subsistence hunts, all meat from sport hunted trophies belongs to and remains within the community where the bear was hunted, and the hunter has to buy the hide from the community. Canada stressed that the sport hunt is not additive but is part of the subsistence hunt. The hunts are highly regulated. Non-aboriginal hunts must be led by an Inuk or Inuvialuit and carried out by dog sledding.

Sport hunting provides an economic value to the communities. Affected communities have limited economic opportunities and receive benefits from hotels and the outfitting of hunts.

Canada pointed out that sport hunting is selective for desirable trophy bears, and consequently smaller, less desirable bears are passed over. If no bear is taken, the tag for that bear is not reused. Subsequently, quotas are not always filled. Canada pointed out that if sport hunting were eliminated, quotas would typically be completely filled, since subsistence hunting is not as selective.

Canada also reiterated that all kills, including defense, incidental, and illegal kills, are included in the quota.

Greenland asked about what part of the quota is affected if an animal is killed incidentally or defensively.

Canada stated that defense kills come out of the community's quota just as if they were taken for subsistence or sport hunting. The meat and hide remain with the community where the defense kill occurs, and there is no personal gain by the person who conducted the defense kill.

Canada explained that incidental kills typically occur in relation to research activities. When an incidental kill occurs, it is taken out of the local community's quota, but the community is reimbursed for the meat since it is no longer consumable. The community also retains the hide.

Russia asked how and who decides how to allocate money received from sport hunting.

Canada responded that some of the funds go to southern outfitters who book the hunts. The remainder goes to the community.

Greenland reiterated that it has initiated user-to-user discussions with Canada and looks forward to continuation of these. As far as sport hunting is concerned, hunters are divided on whether to allow sport hunting. The Department of Industry is chairing a working group on sport hunting of polar bears. However, at present the responsible ministry has other priorities and due to a lack of experience with sport hunting of polar bears within Greenland, it is anticipated that the development of polar bear sport hunting will take some time.

The United States inquired whether Norway or Russia is contemplating a sport hunt in the future.

Norway responded that it is unlikely in the foreseeable future.

Russia reiterated that polar bears are in the red book and not available for trade or commercial use. Only natives can take for subsistence purposes for limited harvest. Russia noted that once a limited native harvest of Chukotka polar bear populations begins, there would probably be a desire to have a program similar to that of Canada. However, currently there is no statutory framework for such activities.

The United States stated that, as an artifact of the MMPA, no sport hunt is allowed. Subsistence hunters are not allowed to transfer the right of hunting. While the MMPA could be amended to allow such activity, it is not likely.

The United States did point out that there is a general provision under the MMPA to waive the hunting moratorium, but it is a very lengthy and complex process involving formal rulemaking and an adjudicated process. Groups could petition the government to initiate this process.

The United States also stated that if polar bears were to be listed under the ESA, by definition they would be considered depleted by the MMPA, and sport hunting would not be possible.

The Chairman summarized that currently Canada is the only range state that allows sport hunting. Greenland is considering it. Russia, the United States, and Norway do not anticipate allowing sport hunting in the foreseeable future.

The Chairman proposed for consideration by the range countries that they agree that sport hunting does not pose a threat to polar bear conservation and that properly managed programs may provide an incentive for polar bear conservation.

Canada agreed with this statement noting that sport hunting is part of the subsistence hunting quota given to communities.

Norway agreed but emphasized the recognition of Articles III and IV under the 1973 Agreement.

Russia, although noting that sport hunting in Russia is currently in contradiction to its legislation, agrees with Articles III and IV of the 1973 Agreement.

The United States and Greenland agreed with the statements with the amendments made.

The Chairman noted consensus on this issue.

Subsistence harvest

The Chairman introduced the topic of subsistence hunting and noted its relation to sport hunting.

Greenland opened the discussion stating that, throughout the Arctic, people depend on natural resources and that, to many Arctic communities, subsistence hunting constitutes the main source of food and income. In Greenland, subsistence hunting of polar bears occurs mostly in northern and eastern regions of Greenland. In both regions, most parts of the animal are consumed or turned into clothing and ornaments. In the east region, the skin is more frequently sold to tanneries.

Subsistence hunting is often defined as the customary or traditional hunting for the purpose of providing meat, skins, etc. for local consumption. In many communities within Greenland, hunting is a major component of community subsistence activities, particularly due to limited alternative economic opportunities.

Greenland pointed out that it does not consider subsistence hunting by indigenous people different from other types of hunting. Subsistence hunting, like any other types of hunting, removes individuals from the population. In Greenland, permission to hunt polar bears depends on income parameters, which is seen as a political distribution

system that can ensure social sustainability by making the resource available for those whose livelihood depends on hunting activities. The hunting of polar bears should be determined by sustainability and population health, rather than on the basis of ethnic or cultural origins.

Therefore, Greenland finds that the most important challenge for management authorities is to achieve sustainable harvest. How the sustainable harvest is distributed among different types of hunting is a political decision regarding who should benefit from the harvest.

The United States discussed the issue of subsistence hunting in Alaska. Under Section 101(b) of the MMPA, native Alaskans have the right to non-restricted subsistence use, unless the species is listed under the U.S. Endangered Species Act. In Alaska, subsistence take has been declining in the last couple of decades. This decline is possibly due to 1) polar bear habitat loss; 2) passing of experienced hunters; and 3) manufactured clothing providing alternatives to traditional dress. Of the subsistence take in Alaska, 60% is from Chukotka and 40% is from the Beaufort Sea.

In the recent proposed ESA listing for polar bears, subsistence hunting was not identified as a threat to the survival of the species. As such, there is the hope of being able to continue this tradition regardless of the outcome of the listing proposal.

The Chairman indicated that, based on discussion, continued coordination between range countries on the management of shared populations is appropriate. The Chairman particularly noted the cooperation between Canada and Greenland, the United States and Russia, and Russia and Norway.

Canada reiterated that only aboriginal people have the right to the quota. In Canada, the quota is based on science and traditional ecological knowledge. Use of the quota is a community decision, and is a fundamental right under land claims. The quota includes all take, and is approximately 4.5% of the population size. Monitoring is key to insuring a sustainable harvest.

Norway stated that subsistence harvest is not an issue in Norway, but agrees with the Chairman's statement to continue range state cooperation in accordance with the 1973 Agreement. Norway stressed that harvest should be part of a scientifically based framework. This meeting should encourage bilateral and circumpolar cooperation, as well as cooperation within the PBSG.

Russia clarified its statement from Tuesday that subsistence harvest only occurs in the Chukotka-Alaska population in accordance with the US-Russia Agreement. No commercial harvest is allowed. Transparent mechanisms to comply with the agreement should be developed.

The United States noted proposed amendments to the MMPA that would allow management plans to be developed before a population becomes depleted, and any

harvest restrictions within such plans are enforceable on all native Alaskans regardless of tribe.

Bear-Human Interactions

Oil and Gas Development

Norway led the discussion by providing a brief overview of oil and gas development within the country. There is limited gas production with the potential for oil production to follow. Norway noted that, if a large reservoir of reserves were discovered, areas presently closed would very likely be opened in the future and potential disturbance to polar bears would occur. Norway noted that range states should draw on the experience of Alaska and Russia. Norway further noted a concern that the level of knowledge on the consequences of oil and gas production is not sufficient at this time. This is especially the case in ice-covered areas.

The United States pointed out that the MMPA provides for exceptions for incidental take during the course of human interactions. This has provided a valuable tool when working with industry and monitoring impacts. Since 1993 when monitoring began on the north slope of Alaska, there have been 1200 bear-human interactions with no injury to humans or bears.

The United States anticipates that the level of interactions may increase in the future based on the relationship between the number of bears on the coast and the position of pack ice. The United States is committed to increasing monitoring and expanding good working relations with the oil and gas industry.

Greenland stated that oil and gas production, as well as mining, are limited. Greenland does anticipate increasing activities in oil and gas exploration. Such exploration will probably also be in areas currently populated by polar bears. A standing working group has been established by the Ministry of Petroleum and Asiaq (the institution responsible for the assessment of the physical, non-living environment) to carry out environmental impact assessments of oil, gas, and mineral exploration and monitor the effects on wildlife and nature.

Russia reported that in the last 10 to 15 years there has been a reduction in the human population in the arctic region. With this reduction, there has been a drop in bear-human conflicts. Where conflicts have occurred, it has been due to bears scavenging out of dumps. There also appears to be an increase in hungry bears along the coast due to habitat changes from climate warming and ice cover.

Russia has identified large reserves of oil and gas in the Arctic and the need for exploration in the future. With expanded production, Russia anticipates increased encounters with polar bears. Russia acknowledged that there is a need to work with oil and gas companies to monitor aspects of production. In the future, shipping traffic will increase and plans to deal with oil spills need to be developed.

Currently, an influx of human populations into arctic areas is beginning, and Russia anticipates an increase in human-bear interactions. Russia noted the need to collaborate with other range countries in obtaining information on human-bear interactions.

Canada notes that oil and gas dependency is placing pressure on the arctic system. Canada reiterated the need to share best management practices for oil and gas production. Canada thanked the United States for presenting information on monitoring programs underway.

Norway drew attention to an upcoming oil and gas assessment under the Arctic Council providing comprehensive status of oil and gas reserves within the arctic, the effects on wildlife, and consequences of oil and gas activities. Norway proposed that range countries use information from that assessment to manage polar bears.

The United States noted the importance of Alaska's experience in exploration on the outer continental shelf. The United States recognizes there will be an expanding demand for resource extractions and the need to evaluate impacts on marine mammals.

The Chairman summarized the discussion, noting that the United States is the most actively involved. The Chairman also indicated the need for monitoring programs and understanding the impact of oil and gas activities on polar bear populations.

Village Safety Issues

Norway opened the discussion noting that the number of human-polar bear encounters close to settlements has increased and is related to longer ice-free periods with a greater number of hungry polar bears on land. These encounters and the number of problem bears killed are likely to increase in the future. Norway particularly noted the effectiveness of Canada's Churchill polar bear alert program despite the increase in the polar bear numbers in the settlement. Similarly, in Norway, fewer bears are killed despite there being more encounters. Norway stressed the need for a combination of public awareness and management changes, and proposed that range States should exchange information and share experiences, including best practices.

Canada reiterated that any polar bears killed because of human-bear encounters are accounted for within the sustainable harvest quota limit, and that defense kills are investigated by officers and illegal kills are prosecuted.

The United States recognized the increase in potential human-bear interactions due to habitat loss, resulting in bears in poor condition. With the subsistence hunting of bowhead whales, polar bears are drawn to the carcasses and waste blubber resulting in increased human-bear interaction. Changes in human behavior such as disposing of carcasses significantly away from settlements have successfully reduced the incidence of these interactions.

Russia also noted increases in bear-human interactions in settlements due to climate changes. Russia identified government recommendations that have been made to improve village safety and reduce interactions. The importance of public education, altering of work and activity schedules to coincide with daylight, and improved lighting around villages and homes was also stressed. In addition, Russia noted that bear patrols have been established to provide additional protection.

The Chairman called for the discussion to be adjourned until after lunch and closed the session.